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SUBJECT: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS II: THE ISSUES

REF: BRUSSELS 755

Sensitive but Unclassified - Please handle accordingly.

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Because of the June 4-7 European Parliament elections, there is no legislative activity between early May and September. The economic crisis and Turkey's accession are pan-European themes in some European Parliament campaigns. Unlike in the 2004 EP elections, U.S.-EU relations are not an issue in a campaign otherwise centered mainly on domestic issues. The turnout is expected to be as low as 40% average participation, and the elections to yield up to 5 percent new MEPs. The EPP-ED (Christian Democrats) and the PES (Socialists/Social Democrats) will vie for the position of the largest group. The EPP-ED will likely lose a number of seats, as the British conservatives and the Czech ODS will be leaving the group to form a new Euro-skeptic/ conservative group.

The results will impact the nomination of the next Commission, in that MEPs confirm both the Commission President and the Commission as a slate. This is the second of three USEU reports on the EP elections; reftel set the stage. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) As of May 11, EP business halted to allow MEPs to hit the campaign trail. The post-election EP will not meet again until July 14-16, at which time the main business will be election of new leadership for the EP, the political groups and the committees (the subject of our third cable in this series). The first plenary after the August summer break will be September 14-17, when voting on legislation will resume. What was not finished before May 11 must be formally revived by a decision of the EP leadership (Conference of Presidents), or die.

LOW TURNOUT, HIGH TURNOVER EXPECTED

¶3. (U) Some analysts are already predicting another drop in turnout this year from a low of 46 % in 2004, especially in central Europe where turnout in 2004 was only 21% in Poland and 17% in Slovakia. The European Parliament has tried reversing this trend by devising its first pan-European get-out-the-vote campaign costing 18 million Euros. Its impact will likely be slight.

¶4. (U) Current EP president Hans-Gert Poettering has expressed concern that low turnout would benefit left and right extremist parties, as well as Euro-skeptics. The first opinion polls, however, predict that the composition of the EP will not change much for the upcoming term. The numbers often cited are around 240 seats for the EPP, around 210 for the PES, 90 for the liberals and 60 for a new conservative/Euro-skeptic group, with the rest being shared between the Greens, extreme left and extreme right parties. The internal turnover is expected once again to be as high as 50% of new MEPs.

FOCUS ON ECONOMIC CRISIS AND DOMESTIC ISSUES

¶5. (U) European governments' handling of the economic crisis will be the key focus of national campaigns. According to analysts,

protectionist and Euro-skeptic parties may benefit from the economic downturn, to the extent that voters lack confidence in the European Parliament to address the problem. According to a Gallup poll, there has been a big shift in priorities, with immigration and climate change as the "big losers." U.S.-EU relations will not rank high as a campaign issue, as the relation is perceived cross-party as positive, unlike in 2004.

¶6. (U) Once again, domestic politics will be at the forefront of the campaigns. In the absence of any pan-European campaign planning in any of the big political parties (the Greens are an exception), national parties tend to use the European elections as a mid-term test for national politics. This lack of Europe-wide coordination is reinforced by the fact that many national leaders put their name at the top of the European lists to attract the voters, with no intention of taking up their seats if elected. The seat would then go to their "alternate" candidate, usually less visible or popular.

THE ISSUE OF TURKEY'S EU ACCESSION

¶7. (U) One Europe-wide issue of note will be Turkey's accession to the EU. No country can join the EU without European Parliament approval. The Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and many in its Christian-Democrat sister party (CDU) oppose Turkey's accession, as does the French UMP, with the support of President Sarkozy. Although a majority of current MEPs favored Turkish accession, they have been critical in their latest reports on Turkey's lack of progress in meeting European standards of democracy.

ELECTIONS RESULTS AND COMMISSION PRESIDENCY: STILL BARROSO

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¶7. (U) Early polls and our EP interlocutors are predicting that the EPP will hold on to its plurality. However, the British Conservatives intend to leave the EPP-ED group, along with the Czech ODS, to form a new conservative/Euro-skeptic party. This loss, the impact of the economic crisis, and a low turnout are potential negatives for the EPP. Our EPP interlocutors have expressed particular concern at the possible progress of the extreme left in many countries, including France, Hungary and Greece.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Jose Manuel Barroso, the current Commission President, is the only candidate for Commission President supported by many Member States (including three Socialist Governments) and the EPP party. The PES is unlikely to put forward a candidate, even if the Socialists win the elections. The Danish PES party leader, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, according to the internet daily EUObserver, said, however, that "if a new majority is possible, then Barroso, who is not the candidate of the PES, would not become Commission President."

¶9. (SBU) A more likely scenario, should the Socialists become the largest group in the EP through alliance with the other left/green parties, is that it would horse-trade its support for Barroso for guarantees on both the Commission's political agenda and assignments to other key posts in the Commission. Under the Nice Treaty, MEPs will need to confirm both the Commission President and the Commission as a slate. END COMMENT.

¶10. (U) Our next report on the EP election will look at some key personalities likely to emerge as a result of the voting.
MURRAY